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Leo Cherne's Magnificent Obsession

By Dale Van Atta

In a move that later seemed prescient, Leo Cherne, chairman of the International Rescue Committee, assigned volunteers to the Sudan six years ago to serve a stream of Ethiopian refugees. As the number of refugees grew, Cherne committed more resources of the privately funded relief group. Then in October 1984, he gave an impassioned speech about the famine to the IRC executive committee, and fellow committee members immediately upgraded the program.

Seven days later, televised scenes of dying Ethiopian children galvanized Americans into opening their hearts and purses. And in the Sudan's border camps, the IRC helped save tens of thousands of lives.

Helping those in need, people suffering from hunger and tyranny, is what Leo Cherne (pronounced Churn) has been doing for most of his 73 years.

In October 1956, the world just watched and did nothing as Hungarians, armed with bricks and Molotov cocktails, fought Russian tanks. Cherne acted. He boarded a Vienna-bound plane with $200,000 worth of antibiotics donated to the IRC. At the Hungarian border, he stashed the drugs in the back of a car and headed for Budapest.

Maneuvering through rubble-strewn streets, Cherne made his way to the freedom fighters' headquarters with the desperately needed drugs. As Red Army tanks massed for their final offensive, he raced toward the border, two Hungarian teen-agers hidden in his car. To avoid Soviet battalions, he drove across fields and pastures, finally smuggling the youngsters into Austria. He flew to New York and went on television to describe the tragic conditions in Hungary. Within two months, Cherne's IRC raised nearly $2.5 million and assisted thousands of Hungarians who had fled their homeland.

Although little-known to the public, Leo Cherne has, as a humanitarian and adviser to U.S. Presidents, played key roles in the great events of modern history. He is a true Renaissance man, having achieved success as a sculptor, lawyer, songwriter, journalist and economist.

Throughout his varied life, Cherne has had one magnificent obsession: an unswerving devotion to liberty. This has been responsible for lifesaving work in behalf of millions of refugees and changed the policies of U.S. and other governments. In 1984, it won him America's highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

To Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D., N.Y.), Cherne has "for more than 40 years been one of the best-kept secrets of American foreign policy. He has an absolutely extraordinary understanding that if you want to get things done in Washington, you let other people take the credit."

Cherne was born in New York City in 1912, the son of Russian refugees. Their love of music influenced Leo, who was recruited for the Metropolitan Opera Children's Chorus. He later composed hundreds of songs, and one, "I'll Never Forget," was a 1941 hit.

Another early occupation was journalism. While in college, he wrote for New York City tabloids, once doing a muckraking exposé of the lethal alcohol being served in Prohibition-era speakeasies. The legal profession lured him next. Cherne passed the bar exam, and in 1935 he answered an ad that read, "Wanted: young attorney capable of writing about Social Security laws."

The employer turned out to be a publication providing legal distillations of various statutes. One of 50 applicants, Cherne was assigned to make a digest of "the Washington unemployment-insurance laws" in five days. He did it in four, only to learn that it was Washington *State* he was supposed to research, not *D.C.*, which he had done. He raced to complete the proper paper in a day—and he was hired.

A year later, Cherne and a partner founded the Research Institute of America to advise corporate clients on economic and regulatory developments. The institute quickly developed a reputation for assessing even the toughest and most controversial issues correctly. This year the institute is celebrating its 50th anniversary, with Cherne as its executive director.

Cherne has been serving Presidents ever since he helped Franklin Roosevelt plan the nation's industrial mobilization for war. Harry Truman assigned him to evaluate the needs of postwar Germany. After Cherne traveled there "undercover" as a journalist, he made far-reaching recommendations to the White House. In part as a result of Cherne's urging, Truman canceled the Morgenthau Plan to turn Germany into an "agrarian society."

Cherne's savvy caught the eye of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who in 1946 was turning feudal Japan into a fledgling democracy. The general summoned Cherne to develop a tax system that would redistribute the wealth of Japan's rich, war-making class—the *zaibatsu*—and create a large middle class so democracy could thrive. The tax reform helped propel the war-ravaged nation into its present position of an economic superpower.

Returning from a trip to Asia in 1954, Cherne fell ill. Doctors diagnosed the illness as acute fatigue. "Whatever you touch," his physician said, "is filled with tension. You must find a relaxing activity."

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Cherne turned to sculpting. Never bothering to study technique, he began by molding a piece of clay into a head. Dr. Albert Schweitzer was the subject for his first bronze bust. When the director of the Smithsonian Institution saw the piece, he made it part of the museum's permanent collection. Since then, Cherne has sculpted several other busts, including ones of Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

Cherne continued to have impact on public policy. As a leader of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in the 1970s, he was among those who became convinced that in many ways the CIA was consistently underestimating Soviet strategic strength. Because of these concerns, outside experts were brought in to examine intelligence data, and CIA miscalculations were corrected.

There is something almost Jeffersonian in Cherne's incredible range of talents and interests. But his special concern has always been the helpless. In 1946 Cherne joined the International Rescue Committee, founded by Albert Einstein and others to aid refugees fleeing totalitarian oppression. Five years later, he was named chairman of the nonpartisan, nonsectarian agency, a position he has held for 35 years.

For the IRC, Cherne has logged millions of miles in behalf of the world's refugees. On a 1966 trip to South Vietnam, he scoured Saigon for 5000 pounds of dried fish to take to a remote village; the Viet Cong had seized all its food. After arriving with the food, Cherne wandered about the village aiding victims. An Army colonel lunged at him a split second before he would have stepped on an enemy mine.

Cherne's wife, Phyllis, long ago accepted her husband's hyperactivity with aplomb: "I'm married to a man who calls not to say 'I'm late at the office,' but 'I must catch a flight to Berlin.' How many dinners have cooled while Saigon or Bangladesh or Angola heated up?"

Cherne is unswervingly loyal and sensitive to friends. Actress Liv Ullmann, whose book *Choices* is dedicated to Leo, met him in 1981 when she presented the IRC chairman with a check for $200,000 on behalf of the artists of Broadway.

"Since I'm very well brought up, I said, 'If you need me for anything, please call upon me,' " she remembers. "You don't say those things to Leo, because fourteen days later I was on my way to Thailand." She had agreed to be part of a "March for Survival" to the Cambodian border to protest the butchery going on in that once-gentle land.

Cherne's hand continues to be strong at the helm of the International Rescue Committee. "We are facing life-and-death emergencies involving people in flight from terror in greater numbers than at any other time in the IRC's history," Cherne says.

In Pakistan, where three million Afghans have sought sanctuary from the Soviets, the IRC operates six medical units and six other child-health units with a staff of 130—about half of them Afghan refugees. By the end of 1985, they were examining and treating some 20,000 Afghan patients a month. The IRC also sponsors a teacher-training program there.

Asked to state his philosophy to fellow IRC volunteers, Cherne responded, "If I am only for myself, who am I? If I am not for others, what am I?"

Former high-school classmate, playwright Henry Denker, once summarized Leo Cherne's career: "He is devoted to healing the sick and feeding the hungry of oppressed nations, and taking unto himself the concerns of people wherever they are deprived of freedom."